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Political Pluralism and the Information Search: Determinants of Group Opinionation

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Abstract

It is a necessary condition that people have an opinion about groups before they can use groups to help make sense of the political world. Beyond individual resources and motivation, the strength of social ties and amount of agreement within networks situated within more or less supportive social contexts affect whether individuals seek out and receive information about groups sufficient to form an opinion of them. The author tests this argument with a sample of Republican primary voters in order to address the implications for the place of interest groups in society and the study of social interaction.

Keywords

opinionation, social networks, religion and politics, interest groups

> If each citizen did not learn . . . to combine with his fellow citizens for the purpose of defending [his freedom], it is clear that tyranny would unavoidably increase together with its equality.
>
> Tocqueville (1840/1994, 106)

Tocqueville vests in associations the ability to maintain the republic but notes that the choice to associate is an individual's and depends on society in some way to motivate and capacitate that choice. Those addressing this question of collective civic participation have grounded their answers largely in capacity—the motivation and resources largely gained through association (Putnam 2000; Verba, Schlozman, and Brady 1995). But citizens need to know their options before pursuing association. Therefore, the civic classroom must articulate not only how to participate in political affairs but also what associational opportunities exist. From Tocqueville's point of view, one key question is what motivates individuals to learn about their associational opportunities?

In this article, I explore what I call *group opinionation*—whether citizens make a judgment of their closeness to an interest group or choose the "don't know" (DK) option. A point of access to the political system is knowing what the associational options are. Before joining a group, using the group as a heuristic (Brady and Sniderman 1985; Conover 1984), using a group endorsement (Lupia 1994; Rapoport, Stone, and Abramowitz 1991), or relying on group identity to mobilize political participation (e.g., Miller et al. 1981), citizens must first have an opinion of whether an interest group is likely to represent their interests. Not knowing about the representativeness of a group removes one powerful tool for understanding the political world and taking meaningful part in political processes. There are important individual-level explanations of group opinionation, including disparities in resources and motivation. However, I focus on how the structure of social networks (whether they are tight-knit or open, agreeable or disagreeable) within social contexts like churches affects whether individuals seek out and receive information about groups sufficient to form an opinion of them.

The investigation of opinionation (also known as opinion holding) has a long history (for a good, if dated, review, see Krosnick and Milburn 1990) and need not receive a comprehensive treatment here. It may be sufficient to note that this literature has remained rooted in

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social psychology and focused on the personal resources, competencies, and motivations of opinion holding. The literature has evaded the effects of social interaction, though a few studies have discussed long-term socialization effects (Atkeson and Rapoport 2003; Rapoport 1982, 1985).

The literature has not explored the differences in opinionation domains (but see Gilens 2001), such as group versus issue opinionation, despite calls to do so: "different scholars employ various measures of information recall without considering the possibility (or the likelihood) that some kinds of information may be more desirable or consequential than others" (Druckman 2005, 517). Thus, the measures employed in this study differ in an important respect from other general measures of opinionation, which have included, for example, choosing the DK option in composite indices of opinion and group measures (Atkeson and Rapoport 2003; Berinsky 2002; Delli Carpini and Keeter 1996; Krosnick and Milburn 1990; Rapoport 1985), the absence of party likes/dislikes (Atkeson and Rapoport 2003; Leighley 1991), making an evaluation of political figures (Gimpel and Wolpert 1996), and non-neutral responses to issue questions (Jacoby 1995).

Here, I focus solely on group opinionation. Given the widespread role of groups, broadly considered, in the practice and study of American politics, group opinionation is a particularly important opinionation domain that merits its own study. But group opinionation is also important analytically because of its place in citizens' informational search processes. Citizens will have to go outside of their immediate social environs to find out about political organizations, especially compared to the plentiful cues for forming issue attitudes that permeate social contexts and networks. Group opinionation does not directly enable participation in public life in the same way as issue opinionation allows people to share their views; instead, group opinionation is an intermediary step that should help link attitudes to political choices and participatory opportunities. That is, group opinionation is particularly useful in drawing out citizens' political coping strategies in response to prevailing social conditions in their attempt to ready themselves to make an important political judgment.

Who Knows Groups?

Anthony Downs (1957) offered a starting point for this work. He suggested that an informational search is costly and few individuals would undertake it, though socially supplied information is relatively cheap and can serve as an acceptable shortcut (see also Huckfeldt and Sprague 1995). Hence, people discuss politics with agreeable (Huckfeldt and Sprague 1995; Mutz 2002a), trusted (Mondak 1990), and knowledgeable partners (Huckfeldt 2001; McClurg 2006a). If they are thus rational in the information they seek and receive from social sources, then perhaps their otherwise overwhelming apathy (e.g., Bennett 1986) and modest political knowledge levels (Delli Carpini and Keeter 1996) can be excused.

But, if socially supplied information is cheap and plentiful and even biased information can be useful (Calvert 1985), then why would citizens seek out other shortcuts, such as the judgments of interest groups and political leaders, which may be more costly to obtain? A simple proposition is that either social relations help to lower the costs of obtaining information about groups or social ties boost the benefits. If they lower the costs, individuals employ the plentiful social shortcuts around them to acquire political information, the side benefit of which is learning about salient political actors such as interest groups. If social relations boost the benefits, individuals are motivated to seek out other information sources due to insufficient trusted and agreeable sources in the social context. Individuals so situated need to expend further resources to look beyond their immediate social environment to other political information sources, such as interest groups, for information to assist in making political judgments. This especially may be the case when the information needed is highly specialized, such as when it bears on the choice of candidates in a primary election, where easy symbols of distinction, like party affiliation, are inaccessible and information may be in short supply.

The essential argument, then, is that the social structure will affect an individual's search for political information in two ways—as a by-product of increased discussion with agreeable and informed discussants and as the result of a direct search for information due to an undersupply of suitable social information sources in the social context. I expand on these general notions in the following sections.

Social Network Influences

A long line of empirical research has emphasized the importance of political talk, from the Columbia school researchers on (e.g., Berelson, Lazarsfeld, and McPhee 1954; Huckfeldt and Sprague 1995). Political discussion can supplement the political information on which individuals can draw, while forging links to wider climates of opinion through opinion leaders (Katz and Lazarsfeld 1955). This is why research has found a persistent link between more discussion and political participation (Klofstad 2007; Leighley 1990; McClurg 2003, 2006a; Mutz 2002a). More discussion should provide more relevant information to assist respondents make group judgments, driving DK responses down.

Granovetter (1973) sparked a shift in how networks were considered, moving from an influence-based perspective, where intimacy was prized, to one where networks are seen as regulating exposure to wider information flows through the strength of ties. Strong ties between network members result in a closed network and greater insularity from the community; weak ties result in a network open to information from throughout, and ultimately reflecting, society (see Huckfeldt et al. 1995). Closed, more insular networks should reflect a reduced supply of information useful for group opinionation, driving up DK responses.

The degree of political agreement in the network and its relationship to political discussion and participation is of profound normative importance and some controversy (Djupe, Sokhey, and Gilbert 2007; Leighley 1990; McClurg 2006a; Mutz 2002a, 2002b, 2006). McPhee (1963; see also Sprague 1982) suggested that differences of opinion drive the social influence process, motivating individuals to reform opinions and test them through discussion until agreement is reached. Mutz (2002a, 2006) argued that exposure to disagreement in networks promotes "deliberative democracy," which is suggestive of an information exchange that can deepen and moderate opinions. At the same time, citizens generally attempt to find discussants like themselves (Huckfeldt and Sprague 1995), though disagreement is ever present and often sustained over time (Huckfeldt, Johnson, and Sprague 2004). Though exposure to difference may weaken levels of political discussion with particular discussants (Mutz 2002a, 2006), it motivates a search for further information to justify a position that may ensnare information about politically active groups. Thus, disagreement between political discussants should spur a process that results in greater group opinionation and fewer DK responses.

Political expertise is also an indicator of the value of political information from a discussant. McClurg (2006a, 737) argued that the effect of expertise on knowledge acquisition is indirect: "Knowledgeable political discussants provide access to information that helps people recognize and reject dissonant political views, develop confidence in their attitudes, and avoid attitudinal ambivalence, thereby making participation more likely." In essence, network expertise will boost the capacity of the respondent to process political information more systematically. Because perceived discussant expertise is a good measure of actual expertise (Huckfeldt 2001), a greater concentration of expert discussants should boost judgments of the listed groups. But, if expertise largely affects the capacity to process information, its effect on opinionation should depend on the availability of political information to process, as argued in the following section.

Contextual Influences

Discussion networks are just one of the many social influences a person may encounter, which might include the social context (e.g., Huckfeldt and Sprague 1995), small groups, and organizational leaders (e.g., Djupe and Gilbert 2003; Leighley 1996). One key indicator of the supply of valuable information sources in a context is gauged through a judgment of social and political similarity, which is at least a correlate of group identity (see Turner et al. 1987). As Djupe and Gilbert (2009) showed in churches, increased judgments of similarity to congregation members breed complacency, whereas dissimilarity motivates a search for more consonant groups, either outside of the church or even within the church in small groups. Therefore, because similarity reduces the motivation to seek further information, greater group similarity should boost the proportion of DK responses.

Dissimilarity with the congregation should only result in a behavioral reaction in the absence of other information, in the same way as when a stereotype is used in the absence of qualifying information (e.g., Rahn 1993). When a social context, like a congregation, is flooded with political information, members are exposed to it whether they feel similar to other members or not. Therefore, an ample political information supply in the context removes the need to rely on dissimilarity to motivate a further information search.

The flow of political information in the context should also affect how network attributes affect opinionation. Though only select work has examined autoregressive influence, in which the effect of a particular discussant is conditional on the supply of preferences in the broader network (Huckfeldt, Johnson, and Sprague 2004), including the *contextual* setting can be essential to understand if and how networks affect political behavior (Djupe and Gilbert 2009; McClurg 2006b). The critical concern here is how attributes of the network control access to information. The effects of discussion in the network should not necessarily vary based on the contextual supply of political information because network discussion constitutes an independent supply of information. Network political agreement and expertise, however, do not supply information, but create incentives for the respondent to pursue information and/or build capacity to process information from the network and beyond. In a sense, disagreeable but expert networks create the conditions for respondents to receive more information. Thus, when the contextual political information supply is plentiful, network disagreement and expertise should boost group opinionation but should likely have no effect when the contextual supply is low as citizen willingness is frustrated by an information shortage (other things equal).

External Communication

Interest groups are widely active in campaigns, of course, which necessitates controlling for contacts received from groups and the campaigns. Obviously, the more contacts from groups, the more likely recipients should have an opinion of them. The media covers the activities of groups attempting to influence elections, so media consumption should also boost group opinionation.

Personal Factors

Beyond social structural influences, any explanation of the opinionation of citizens must also take into account civic resources, measures of cognitive ability, and psychological engagement. Similar to participation models (Verba, Schlozman, and Brady 1995), the ability to state an opinion is driven by resource allocations, including education and income, as well as by the historic distinctions sustaining inequality: race and gender. Nie, Junn, and Stehlik-Barry (1996) argued that education facilitates the acquisition and use of political information through expanded cognitive abilities (see also Krosnick and Milburn 1990; Zaller 1992). Atkeson and Rapoport (2003; see also Shapiro and Mahajan 1986) reported that women choose "don't know" at a higher rate than men fairly consistently over the history of the National Election Studies (NES), in part because of education and political awareness, but also because of intergenerational socialization (Rapoport 1982, 1985) and subjective political competence (Krosnick and Milburn 1990). For women, although political resources partly explain the opinionation gap (similar to selected findings of Burns, Schlozman, and Verba 2001, for the effect of resources on participation), they do not close the gap (Atkeson and Rapoport 2003).

As with all forms of participation in politics, a citizen's degree of political engagement is likely to play an important role in his or her ability to venture an opinion. The search for information depends on some form of interest in the process and the sense that participation in it might make a difference or that a political expression will be noted (i.e., some form of efficacy; Krosnick and Milburn 1990; Zaller 1992). Although interest in the campaign is included, the survey did not ask about efficacy. Political knowledge and media use register the results of political engagement (Delli Carpini and Keeter 1996; Zaller 1992) and they are included as such here. Likewise, the strength of partisanship connotes an investment in the political process (Hershey and Beck 2003, 118-19; Rosenstone and Hansen 1993, 155) that should boost opinionation.

Another explanation that might account for selecting "don't know" should be confronted before moving on. Most research suggests the straightforward explanation that individuals choose the "don't know" option because they actually don't know (Krosnick and Milburn 1990; Schuman and Presser 1981). But, social desirability effects may encourage individuals with unpopular opinions to abstain from expressing their opinion (Berinsky 1999). In this case, it is highly unlikely that the unabashed partisans in this sample, described in the following, would refrain from expressing closeness to widely covered groups that have, for example, spurred successful initiative campaigns in the past (such as Ohio's Issue 1 in 2004, which banned recognition of same-sex couples by the state).

Data and Method

Immediately following the May 2006 gubernatorial primary, a random sample of 4,000 Republican primary voters in Franklin County, Ohio, were surveyed by mail. Franklin County was selected because the county is among the quickest in Ohio to compile the voter file, from which voters were sampled. In all, 1,062 usable surveys were received for a response rate of 26.6 percent; the total return was a few percentage points higher. The response rate is not high, though it is in line with or greater than typical mail surveys, but the sample is representative of primary voters in at least one important respect—the vote. According to the Secretary of State's report on the gubernatorial primary, Jim Petro won the majority of the vote in Franklin County with 52.3 percent of the vote; the sample records Petro receiving 49.7 percent, with his rival Ken Blackwell (the controversial Secretary of State) besting him with 50.3 percent.

Franklin County is a favorite for marketing surveys because of its rough representativeness of Americans (Hawkings and Nutting 2003), and others have argued that Ohio is a decent proxy for American politics as a whole (e.g., Green 2006). My interest does not lie with Franklin County, Republican primary voters, or the gubernatorial contest, of course. Instead, the sample is valuable to the extent it reveals social dynamics that might be more broadly applicable. One particularly helpful component of this study is its setting in a primary. Aside from the fact that groups active in primaries below the presidential level have not received systematic attention, the value of the primary election lies in the information demands it places on voters, creating a need to use whatever cues are available to distinguish between almost indistinguishable candidates.

In the 2006 Ohio gubernatorial primary, Petro shifted to the right to seek the endorsements of prominent interest groups or at least neutralize the perceived benefit Blackwell had of powerful religiously motivated groups,

such as Ohio Right to Life and the widely covered Ohio Restoration Project founded by prominent Ohio Revs. Russell Johnson and Rod Parsley (Dao 2005; Hallet 2005). To help make sense of the primary, the value of endorsements, and the difference between the two candidates, voters would have to be able to assess first how their interests align with the prominent interest groups involved in the campaign. Moreover, asking this question among primary voters constitutes a strong test of the framework advanced. Primary voters are more interested in and informed about politics and are, naturally, stronger partisans (e.g., Abramowitz, McGlennon, and Rapoport 1981; Geer 1988; Norrander 1989). Because stronger partisans have more consonant networks (Mutz 2006, 33) and difference drives the social influence process (McPhee 1963), this sample should be more resistant to social pressures than would general election voters or the citizenry as a whole and any effects found here should be magnified in the general population.

Network and Contextual Measurement

I use egocentric network data, for which the survey employed a political name generator to gain up to four discussants.[1] To gauge the effect of the network, responses for all discussants named are averaged. Two essential aspects of networks are included in the analysis: the degree of political information flowing to respondents through their networks (discussion and insularity) and measures of the presumed worth of that information (agreement and expertise; full coding information is available in the electronic version of the article on the *PRQ* Web site at http://prq.sagepub.com/supplemental/).

The extent of discussion is captured with campaign-specific questions, which is crucial to the credibility of employing the information search framework. Instead of a generic political discussion question, respondents were asked if they discussed the "candidates for the Republican nomination for governor." The survey then asked if they discussed each of the candidates' abortion stances, gay marriage views, positions on taxes and spending, general election chances, and personal integrity. Summing these measures across all discussants creates a total measure of discussion, which also reflects the size of the network (McClurg 2003). The degree of network insularity is generated by averaging responses to a simple query asked about each discussant: "Does this person know others you listed?"

To tap network agreement, the survey asked: "How often do you think this person would disagree about politics and public affairs with other people you know?"[2] Considered together, these averaged responses across the network give us a sense of not just whether politics might be avoided between a discussant and respondent, but whether the network reinforces political avoidance through discussant-to-discussant ties. The survey captured discussant expertise with the following question: "Would you say the person tends to know more or less than you about campaigns and politics?"

Though certainly not the only context helping to shape people's political lives, churches are particularly appropriate contexts to consider for Ohio Republican primary voters. Only about 10 percent of the sample indicated that they never attended a church, though not all of the remainder completed the survey's church battery (about three-fourths did). Respondents were asked if they were similar or not to the rest of the congregation in terms of their theological beliefs, political party affiliation, ethnicity/race, stance on gay marriage, support for the Religious Right, and members' political activism. When averaged, the mean score is .67 (SD = .29), showing far from perfect unity and real variation.

Politicization of the church is assessed from the perspective of members, who were asked (1) if anyone from their church asked them to get involved in the primary campaign, either to vote (which 16 percent so noted), vote for a specific candidate (2.5 percent), or attend a rally (.8 percent), and (2) if their church held events to discuss any of eight salient political issues listed, which about 20 percent of attenders so noted. Taken together, just about 30 percent of the sample noted at least one of these activities taking place in their church—such churches earn the label *political church*. Although this is not a comprehensive assessment of the political information flow in churches, it does have two benefits—it suggests the degree to which the member is aware of political action in church and the degree to which the member is networked politically in church.

Don't Know Distributions

Respondents to this survey were asked how close they felt to a list of eight organizations selected because of their recent prominence in Ohio politics and promoting conservative causes. Most of these groups were active in the primary campaign and the two candidates actively contended for their support.[3] Importantly, these are precisely the interest groups most useful to Ohio Republican primary voters. The groups listed are campaign, location, and time specific: Several of the groups were recently formed and the groups appealed specifically to the surveyed population and candidates. Thus, the group opinionation measure should respond to fluctuations in short-term factors, such as social network interaction (rather than the reverse).

Table 1 reports the proportion choosing the "don't know" option for each group listed, sorted from the

Table 1. The Proportion Choosing "Don't Know" When Asked How Close They Feel to These Groups

Groups	Proportion choosing "don't know"	Standard Deviation
Ohio Republican Party	.081	.273
Ohio Right to Life	.155	.362
Ohio Christian Coalition	.350	.477
Average index	.443	.318
Buckeye Firearms Association	.579	.494
Citizens for Community Values	.597	.491
Ohio Taxpayers Association	.598	.491
Ohio Restoration Project	.655	.476
We Believe Ohio	.699	.459

Source: 2006 Ohio Republican Primary Voter Survey. $N \sim 970$.

lowest to the highest. The proportion choosing DK for the Ohio Republican party provides us a baseline of 8 percent, suggesting how far the attractiveness of avoiding the selection of a response goes. The proportions climb steadily from there, with more than half of the sample claiming not to know five of the eight groups. Given the attention it received in the nation and especially central Ohio, it is startling to note that about two-thirds of Ohio Republican primary voter respondents did not know about the Ohio Restoration Project, which was gunning to take over the Ohio Republican party and received wide coverage because of that goal (Hallett 2005).

From these data, an averaged index of the don't know responses was computed, ranging from 0 to 1 (the nonaveraged index ranged from 0 to 8). As seen in Table 1, the average respondent did not know 44 percent of the listed groups and there is a fairly wide dispersion around the mean (.32). That is, a lot of primary voters did not know enough to rate many of the interest groups most widely involved in the campaign and there is considerable variance in their responses.

Don't Know Model Results

The estimates of the proportion of groups that respondents claim not to know are shown in Table 2. Separate estimation results are shown for three groups: the total sample, those who attend a political church, and those who do not attend a political church. The purpose of this division is to assess how network effects may shift under different contextual conditions. The worth of incorporating the political church seems justified by the variance in some key social structural variables, determined by an interaction term test, the results of which are shown in the final column.[4] It is worth pointing out that attending a political church by itself does not affect group opinionation directly. Instead, a politicized context affects how networks affect opinionation.

Social Context Effects

In the total sample model (first column), the more similar respondents are to their church, the more groups they do not know. The most similarity adds just fewer than 10 percent more groups they don't know. Boosting that proportion is greater church attendance, which for the most frequent attenders has about the same effect as similarity. It is not possible to say they work together, however, as the effects of similarity are limited by the kind of church the respondent attends and church attendance is significant and positive for both those in political and nonpolitical churches. Similarity has no effect on attenders of a political church (second column) but boosts DK responses for those attending a nonpolitical church (the difference in coefficients approaches significance). That is, when the context provides sufficient political information, judgments of dissimilarity do not motivate a further information search.

While these two variables may not work together, the effects of both variables are entirely consistent with an information search perspective. That is, attendance captures exposure to political information in political churches. Because most churches avoid the explicit mention of candidates, parties, and interest groups and focus on issues (Djupe and Gilbert 2003; Kohut et al. 2000), this exposure satisfies the need for further information while keeping the proportion of group DK responses high. Attendance also functions as a measure of insularity; for instance, Mutz (2006) noted that church member discussants are the least politically dissonant. Moreover, similarity cues are redundant for information search calculations in a politicized church, where more accurate cues are plentiful. But, in a nonpolitical church, members assess whether they are similar or not before pursuing information elsewhere—those dissimilar to church members have reduced DK responses.

Social Network Effects

By and large, respondents who (1) spoke frequently with their discussants with (2) disagreeable opinions and (3) who did not know each other are more opinionated about important interest groups. That is, in the total sample model, while expertise has no effect, greater amounts of discussion in more disagreeable and open networks predict more opinionation (fewer DK responses). Respondents with above average (mean +1 *SD*) political discussion know 4 percent more groups than those with below average (mean –1 *SD*) discussion, which suggests just how little of what we call political knowledge is communicated in everyday discussion. Above average insular networks boost DK responses by about 6 percent over

Table 2. Determinants of the Selection of "Don't Know" for Groups Involved in the Campaign

Social context	Total sample			Political church			Nonpolitical church			Δ
Similarity to church members	.07	(.05)	†	.00	(.08)		.11	(.06)	*	
Church attendance	.14	(.06)	**	.14	(.10)	†	.14	(.07)	*	
Political church	.00	(.03)		—			—			
Social network										
Network insularity	.12	(.04)	***	.14	(.06)	**	.12	(.05)	**	
Network political discussion	–.00	(.00)	†	–.01	(.00)	*	–.00	(.00)		
Network political agreement	.06	(.03)	**	.12	(.04)	***	.02	(.04)		†
Network political expertise	.02	(.03)		–.01	(.04)		.04	(.04)		
External communication										
Group contacts	–.03	(.01)	***	–.03	(.02)	*	–.02	(.01)	*	
Media use	–.01	(.01)	*	–.02	(.01)		–.01	(.01)		
Personal resources										
Political knowledge	–.01	(.04)		.03	(.07)		–.03	(.06)		
Partisan strength	–.02	(.01)	†	–.02	(.02)		–.01	(.02)		
Political interest	–.01	(.02)		.00	(.04)		–.02	(.03)		
Gender	.09	(.03)	***	.09	(.04)	**	.09	(.03)	***	
Education	.03	(.01)	**	.02	(.02)		.03	(.02)	†	
Constant	.07	(.14)		.02	(.22)		.14	(.16)		
Adjusted R^2	.09			.10			.07			
N	576			227			349			
SEE	.29			.28			.30			

Source: 2006 Ohio Republican Primary Voter Survey.
Note: Figures in parentheses are ordinary least squares regression estimates. The Δ column refers to the difference in coefficients between the political and nonpolitical church models using an interaction terms test in a total sample model. SEE = standard error of the estimate.
*$p < .10$. **$p < .05$. ***$p < .01$ (two-tailed tests); †$p < .10$ (one-tailed test).

below average insular networks, the same size effect gained from above average agreeable networks.

One network effect varies by the social context and it is an important one. While agreement in the network drives up DK responses overall, it turns out that its effects are limited to a politicized church context, where the network above average in agreement increases DK responses by almost nine points compared to the network below average in agreement. Network agreement has no effect in nonpolitical churches. That disagreement functions differently depending on the context is amenable to Huckfeldt, Johnson, and Sprague's (2004) general notion of autoregressive social influence, as a politically informative *context* appears necessary for disagreeable *networks* to expand political learning. Without a political reservoir (e.g., a politicized church) to tap into, disagreeable networks appear not to have systematic effects on political learning, which Djupe and Gilbert (2009) found applies to political participation as well (see also McClurg 2006b).

External Communication

It is not surprising to find that group contacts positively affect opinionation, though it is noteworthy that social structural effects remain significant in the presence of group contacts. Each contact boosts opinion holding by almost 3 percent and the average voter receives just that much of a boost (mean number of contacts is 1); one standard deviation greater than the mean grants another 3 percent increase. As we would expect, greater media use drives up opinionation because group activity, in terms of candidates seeking endorsements and groups campaigning on behalf of candidates, makes up a good portion of the noteworthy events of primary campaigns. Moving from below to above average media consumption boosts opinionation by 4 percent.

Personal Resources

Few individual resources perform as expected and none vary significantly in effect across contexts. The most consistent finding is that females are less opinionated about groups, something to which I will return later. Surprisingly, those with more education more often select the DK option, suggestive of an individualistic search for information the more educated employ that evades interest groups. Among this sample of primary voters, in which variance is constrained, political interest has no effect, but greater partisan strength marginally drives down DK responses.

Table 3. Determinants of the Selection of "Don't Know" for Christian Right Groups Involved in the Campaign

Social context	Total sample			Protestant, Christian Right (CR) opinion holders			Non–Protestant CR opinion holders			Δ
Similarity to church members	.08	(.05)	†	–.05	(.10)		.11	(.06)	*	
Church attendance	.16	(.06)	**	.05	(.14)		.19	(.07)	***	
Political church	–.02	(.03)		–.04	(.05)		–.01	(.03)		
Protestant, CR opinion holder	–.04	(.03)		—			—			
Social network										
Network insularity	.13	(.04)	***	.17	(.08)	**	.12	(.05)	**	
Network political discussion	–.00	(.00)	**	–.01	(.00)	*	–.00	(.00)	†	
Network political agreement	.07	(.03)	**	.04	(.06)		.07	(.03)	**	
Network political expertise	.04	(.03)	†	.04	(.05)		.05	(.03)	†	
External communication										
Group contacts	–.03	(.01)	***	–.05	(.02)	**	–.03	(.01)	**	
Media use	–.01	(.01)		–.01	(.02)		–.01	(.01)	†	
Personal resources										
Political knowledge	–.02	(.05)		.06	(.09)		–.04	(.06)		
Partisan strength	–.01	(.01)		–.03	(.02)		–.01	(.02)		
Political interest	–.01	(.03)		.12	(.06)	**	–.04	(.03)		**
Gender	.07	(.03)	***	.02	(.05)		.08	(.03)	***	
Education	.02	(.02)		.08	(.03)	***	.00	(.02)		**
Constant	.01	(.15)		–.31	(.32)		.07	(.18)		
Adjusted R^2	.09			.09			.11			
N	571			138			433			
SEE	.31			.29			.32			

Source: 2006 Ohio Republican Primary Voter Survey.
Note: Figures in parentheses are ordinary least squares regression estimates. The Δ column refers to the difference in coefficients between the political and nonpolitical church models using an interaction terms test in a total sample model. SEE = standard error of the estimate.
*$p < .10$. **$p < .05$. ***$p < .01$ (two-tailed tests); †$p < .10$ (one-tailed test).

The Possibility of Selective Group Opinionation

One possible way around the social structural impediments to opinionation is that some people and some networks are information specialists—they seek out information about groups with which they are likely to identify. This possibility is especially important to test in this case because the church is the context employed and the information effects of the church social structure may be limited to groups with religious underpinnings or overtones (see also Djupe and Neiheisel 2008).

To provide the most rigorous test, I focus on a group of particular interest in this Republican primary: Are Protestant voters who support a Christian Right (CR) political agenda more likely to know about Christian Right groups? [5] CR agenda supporters are compared to the rest of the sample, employing the same interaction term approach used in Table 2, to assess differences in the estimated effects of the variables in the model. If individuals opinionate selectively, the estimated effects should vary across subpopulations. The results are presented in Table 3.

Before turning to those results, a quick examination of the group opinionation means among these portions of the sample is revealing. CR agenda supporters did not know 43.7 percent of all listed groups, while the rest of the sample did not know 44.6 percent (the difference is not significant). But, a look specifically at CR groups tells us the same story—CR agenda supporters did not know 41.9 percent of listed CR groups while the rest of the sample did not know 43.0 percent (again the difference is *ns*). The two groups may still come to their opinionation levels differently, which is what the multivariate examination may reveal.

The general pattern in the estimation results in Table 3 looks the same as in Table 2. Insularity in the context and network reduces opinionation, while more discussion, network disagreement, and group contacts boost it. Interestingly, having more political experts in the network is positively related to knowing *fewer* CR groups, though

the effect is statistically imprecise. Some important variables are not significant in the CR agenda supporter model, including similarity to the church and church attendance. In fact, the sign switches on church similarity, suggesting that a cohesive church home for the likely constituency of the CR might boost opinionation about CR groups. At the same time, a more agreeable network among agenda supporters is insignificant, while it is significant and positive in the total sample and non–CR agenda supporter models. However, the interaction term test does not reveal significant differences between these coefficients in any case.

Instead, only two personal resources have significantly different effects among CR agenda supporters. Among non–CR agenda supporters, more political interest points toward having the expected effect, reducing DK responses. But, among CR supporters, more interest is significantly related to *increases* in DK responses. Education has no effect among nonsupporters but has a positive and significant effect among CR supporters, acting to increase DK responses. Because CR agenda supporters are more insular on almost all measures than the rest of the sample, the effects of interest and education showcase the perverse effects of increased engagement in a low information environment or, perhaps, their highly individualistic search for information.

In sum, because of the lack of significant differences in network and church context effects on CR agenda supporters versus nonsupporters, I can tentatively conclude that there are general social structural effects on group opinionation. Even Christian Right agenda supporters surrounded by likeminded people do not learn more about groups who claim to represent their interests. CR supporters are just as unlikely as nonsupporters to know about CR groups and they come to know about those groups in the same ways.

Don't Know: Gender

In their thorough analysis of the gendered patterns in opinionation through the latter half of the twentieth century, Atkeson and Rapoport (2003) found a consistent gender gap despite the dramatic increase in education and income levels of women, attributing the residual gap to socialization. One of the more consistent effects in the aforementioned models is a gender difference in opinionation, despite the fact that the sample is composed of resource- and engagement-rich citizens. In this sample, women are just under 10 percent less opinionated than men, all else equal. Of course, not all else is equal because women are less resourceful and less engaged in politics than men (Burns, Schlozman, and Brady 2001). In addition, Djupe, Sokhey, and Gilbert (2007) added that there are important social structural barriers to women developing civic skills and being recruited into politics, which may have parallels in group opinionation.

Therefore, a more appropriate strategy for assessing gender differences is to gauge the total impact of gender differences using gender-specific values of interest. It must be remembered, however, that this sample has constrained variance considering that these men and women are all primary voters in a non–presidential election year. Still, to help provide a broader perspective on the contours of gender differences, Table 4 presents mean values for all variables included in Table 2 for men and women, a test for the difference in means, and estimated differences in opinionation based on the differences in means (using coefficients from Table 2's total sample model).

The results in Table 4 complicate the picture somewhat and challenge some of the straightforward notions advanced in previous studies. By and large, the gaps between men and women in resources and engagement are noted here. Women are less politically knowledgeable, less educated, and less frequent consumers of mass media, though they are just as interested and as intense partisans as men. In other studies, all of these are important factors affecting opinion holding. However, just as Djupe, Sokhey, and Gilbert (2007) found for civic resources, there are important differences in the social structure between men and women that impinge on their opinionation. Women, generally, have more insular social networks and perceive themselves to be more similar to their congregations, confirming research finding women involved in more homophilous voluntary organizations (e.g., McPherson and Smith-Lovin 1986). Huckfeldt and Sprague (1995, 191) went further to argue that "the political significance of gender is directly related to its potential for structuring social interaction, thereby affecting the transmission and diffusion of political messages." Women have fewer political discussions, agree slightly less often with discussants, and have less expert discussants, thereby reinforcing barriers to full participation.

Most of those differences are relevant to opinionation levels, according to Table 2. However, the sum of the estimates based on the difference in means only amounts to a few percentage points. The most potent gaps are due to variance in church attendance and education, but they work against each other. Differences in network attributes between men and women also work at cross-purposes with regard to group opinionation. Less discussion drives up DK responses, but more disagreement in their networks reduces DK responses among women, as does their less expert networks.

All told, women are just over 10 percent less opinionated than men. Not considering the education effect, which runs counter to findings in other studies, widens

Table 4. Gender Differences in Factors Affecting Opinionation (Means and Mean Differences)

Social Context	Women	Men	Mean difference		Opinionation difference
Similarity to church members	0.69	0.66	.03	†	.002
Church attendance	0.66	0.60	.06	***	.008
Political church	0.28	0.32	–.04	†	.000
Social network					
Network insularity	0.82	0.81	.01		
Network political discussion	10.41	11.25	–.84	*	.002
Network political agreement	2.42	2.47	–.06	†	–.003
Network political expertise	1.91	2.12	–.21	***	–.004
External communication					
Group contacts	0.95	1.02	–.06		
Media use	4.22	4.46	.24	**	.003
Personal resource					
Political knowledge	0.60	0.66	–.06	***	.001
Partisan strength	2.92	2.95	–.03		
Political interest	2.54	2.56	–.02		
Education	3.73	3.97	–.24	***	–.007
Total effect of gender differences on group opinionation					.003
Total effects on group opinionation including gender effect					.093

Source: 2006 Ohio Republican Primary Voter Survey.
Note: The opinionation difference column is calculated using the "total sample" coefficients from Table 2 and the means reported in this table. A negative entry indicates women are less opinionated as a result of the gender difference in means. The "total effect" row simply sums the "opinionation differences" column, while the "total effects" row also includes the gender coefficient from the total sample results in Table 2 (.09).
*$p < .10$. **$p < .05$. ***$p < .01$ (two-tailed tests); †$p < .10$ (one-tailed test).

the gap by a few percentage points. Therefore, while resources are important and gender role socialization no doubt plays a role, it is also important to capture the current social structural position of women versus men to fully understand the distribution of politically relevant resources like group opinionation.

Conclusion

Having an opinion is essential to representation through the many modes available to citizens. Citizens who choose the DK option, especially women, are less able to engage in social deliberation over political alternatives, crucial in the creation of public opinion (Atkeson and Rapoport 2003; Huckfeldt and Sprague 1995). And political participation is related in an essential way to opinion ownership (Atkeson and Rappoport 2003; Leighley 1991). All of these findings are rooted in resource inequities and have profound implications for popular representation.

Thus far, no one has inquired into the social network and contextual foundations of opinionation, and the implications of the patterns uncovered here lead to different conclusions for popular representation. The exploration of opinionation in this article begins in a different place, thinking less of what citizens own and more about where they are. Especially if citizens are rational and efficient in their search for information, they are limited by the social structure in ways that affect the path trodden to gain essential political information, the kind of information received, and the political choices individuals are able to make.

The evidence suggests that individuals are more likely to pursue information that allows judgments of interest groups (group opinionation) when there is not a trusted supply of information socially. Individuals are more opinionated about groups when they are less like others in the broader context and less like their discussion partners, though their learning about groups depends on a ready supply of political information in the surrounding environment.

The representational implications of these patterns question some conventional wisdom about the dangers of the concentration of interests. As it goes, groups without exposure to different ideas are prone to opinion spirals and hence extreme, intolerant views and are the most likely to participate in politics (e.g., Mutz 2006; Sunstein 2002). But, at least in this sample, the crucial consideration appears to follow Granovetter's (1973) logic—group strength lies in weak ties. When social relations are more insular, they make fewer connections with groups representing their interests that would mobilize them to political action. Perhaps we need to fear ideological concentrations less when they are in pockets and more when they form webs.

In this account, individuals have access to multiple sources of information, none of which necessarily encourages debate. Thus, this account questions the distinction between a participatory and deliberative democracy, in which citizens exposed to difference may deliberate but then participate at reduced levels (Mutz 2006). When faced with difference, individuals reach out to learn about groups that may inform them and mobilize them to action. Thus, there are still important normative benefits of exposure to difference, but it may work in a different way than previously noted. Previous work suggests that individuals exposed to different views will build more considered, knowledgeable opinions (Druckman and Nelson 2003; Gutmann and Thompson 1996; Huckfeldt, Johnson, and Sprague 2004; Mutz 2002b). However, mere exposure to difference may not encourage the deep exploration of political issues from various perspectives. Instead (or in addition), citizens may only learn to protect their freedoms and values by learning about and joining associations when they are confronted with difference in their social network and context. That is, they may only seek to learn about associational opportunities when the social supply of information is inappropriate for their purposes and they are motivated to look elsewhere.

The implications for interest groups are profound, even if the effects are marginal. Political organizations bank on the nodal qualities of their members—that they are points of contact controlling access to members of their network (Lin 1999). The Daley machine in Chicago relied on social networks by demanding votes from every patronage employee (Hershey and Beck 2003, 56; Rakove 1975, 116). Party contacts are made at the nodes with the hope that information will travel socially, diffusing the party's endorsements (Huckfeldt and Sprague 1992). Using the Internet and e-mail, interest groups hope for the same diffusion of their message by asking members to, for instance, sign a petition and pass it along to others they know.

Groups are thought to represent the relevant interests in society, though clearly not everyone who cares about the environment, for instance, is a member of the Sierra Club. The logic articulated in this article suggests several important reasons why. First, groups will have a difficult time penetrating the social structural barriers of closed, agreeable networks to reach the very people most likely to support their cause. Second, those likely supporters, even if reached, are not motivated to pursue a connection to the group because they have ample, trusted information sources. Third, if individuals learn about interest groups incidentally through social discussion, then they may have limited motivation to join, having already resolved their information search.

There are individuals, though, who are likely to seek out and learn about interest groups—they have more disagreeable, more quiescent, and less insular networks and inhabit less similar contexts. The power of this kind of individual to diffuse information generated by the interest group is circumscribed because of the structure of his or her social network that motivated the search in the first place. Of course, this reduces the power of the organization. We, not to mention candidates and elected officials, might think of interest groups much differently if we understand their memberships to be composed of lone wolves instead of lieutenants with command over platoons—that is, network end points rather than nodes.

The results also support the logic of the information search (Downs 1957) that is frequently cited as an assumption but rarely tested. Citizens pursue information beyond immediate social sources as they are able and when they are forced to by having few other easily accessible options. If it holds in other populations, conventionally measured political knowledge may be the end result of an at least partly social process. The logic found in operation here is also important for what it suggests about information search order. Individuals consult their social intimates, their contexts, and then the broader environment when acquiring political information. The upshot for the study of social influence is that the focus exclusively on networks is insufficient—networks are not substitutes for contexts and a focus solely on networks excludes important direct and moderating effects from the context.

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Notes

1. The wording, used by Huckfeldt and Sprague (1995) and the 2000 National Elections Studies (NES), is: "From time to time, people discuss government, elections, and politics. Looking back over the last few months, we would like to know the people you talked with about these matters. These

people might be relatives, spouses, friends, or acquaintances. Please think of the first four people that come to mind and answer each question for each person. We will **not** record the names of people you list below." The network spawned from the political generator differs slightly from an "important matters" battery, emphasizing weak ties and more political discussion (Klofstad, McClurg, and Rolfe forthcoming).

2. Using a different measure of agreement with discussants, "How often did you disagree in these conversations about the primary campaign and the candidates (Petro and Blackwell)?" returned essentially the same results.
3. The exception is We Believe Ohio, which formed in 2006 as a group of liberal religious interests to counter the religious conservative groups, like Ohio Restoration Project, active in Ohio politics.
4. Differences between the political church and nonpolitical church coefficients are assessed using a dummy variable alternative to the Chow test (Gujarati 2003, 306). This involves estimating a model combining those in political and nonpolitical churches and including interaction terms composed of political church and every other independent variable. A significant interaction term ($p < .10$) indicates that the coefficient estimates are different based on attending a political church; the final column in the table indicates which coefficients are significantly different. The separate model results are presented for ease of display only.
5. The variable consists of Protestants or "Other Christians" who agree with a strong pro-life stance and disagree with gay rights—22 percent of the sample fits these descriptors. The proportion jumps to 28 percent of the sample if no religious tradition selection is employed and does not change the results.

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